

Administration of Barack Obama, 2012

**Remarks at the Asian Pacific American Institute for Congressional Studies
Annual Gala**

May 8, 2012

The President. Thank you. Everybody, please, please, have a seat. Have a seat. You're making me blush. [*Laughter*] *Mahalo!*

Audience members. *Mahalo!*

The President. Thank you so much. Thank you, Norm, for that kind introduction. More importantly, thank you for your lifetime of distinguished service to our country. I want to thank all the Members of Congress who are with us—including two people who are fighting hard every day on behalf of every member of this community—Judy Chu and Mike Honda. Give them a big round of applause.

Now, I am thrilled to be here tonight because all of you hold a special place in my heart. When I think about Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, I think about my family—my sister Maya; my brother-in-law Konrad, who's in the house somewhere—I don't know where Konrad is—my nieces Suhaila and Savita. I think about all the folks I grew up with in Honolulu, as part of the—[*applause*].

Audience member. Aloha! [*Laughter*]

The President. —as part of the Hawaiian *ohana*. I think about the years I spent in Indonesia. So for me, coming here feels a little bit like home. This is a community that helped to make me who I am today. It's a community that helped make America the country that it is today.

So your heritage spans the world. But what unites everyone is that in all of your families you have stories of perseverance that are uniquely American. Some of you—those from Hawaii or the Pacific Islands—live where your family has lived for generations and your story is in part, about keeping alive treasured native traditions. But for others, your story starts with ancestors who at some point, left behind everything they knew to seek the promise of a new land. Maybe the story traces back a century and a half, to the laborers who risked their lives to connect our coasts by rail. Maybe it begins with one of the hundreds of thousands of immigrants who, decades ago, made the tough journey to Angel Island.

Maybe the story starts with your parents. Or maybe it starts with you. But here's the thing. No matter when it began, no matter where it began, your stories are about someone who came here looking for new opportunities not merely for themselves, but for their children, and for their children's children, and for all generations to come.

Few of them had money. A lot of them didn't have belongings. But what they did have was an unshakeable belief that this country—of all countries—is a place where anybody can make it if they try.

Now, many of them faced hardship, many of them faced ridicule, many of them faced racism. Many were treated as second-class citizens, as people who didn't belong. But they didn't give up. They didn't make excuses. They kept forging ahead. They kept building up America. They kept fighting for America. Like Danny Inouye, who's here. They were trailblazers. Danny, who was my Senator most of my life. [*Laughter*] Love that man.

But they were trailblazers like Dalip Singh Saund, a young man from India who, in 1920, came to study agriculture, stayed to become a farmer, and took on the cause of citizenship for all people of South Asian descent. And once Dalip earned his own citizenship, he stepped up to serve the country he loved, and became the first Asian American elected to the Congress.

They were pioneers like my former Congresswoman Patsy Mink, who was not only the first Asian American woman elected to Congress, but the author of Title IX, which has changed the playing field for all of our girls.

And then there's the story of a young Japanese American boy, just 10 when his family was forced from their home and taken hundreds of miles away to an internment camp. For 3 years, they lived in that camp, but when that boy got home, he didn't turn his back on America, he devoted his life to America. In his words, he pledged "to speak out for the underrepresented and to pick up on those issues that weren't being carried by others." And as the first Asian American to ever serve in a President's Cabinet, Norm Mineta made good on that pledge.

So think about how proud all those previous generations would be to see this room, to see how far this community has come. Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders are now the inventors and entrepreneurs keeping our country on the cutting edge; the business men and women at the helm of some of our most successful industries; leaders in every aspect of American life—in science and medicine, in education, in sports, in the arts, in our Armed Forces, in our Government, and in our courts. In fact, over the past 3 years, we have more than doubled the number of Asian Americans on the Federal bench.

Just yesterday, Jacqueline Nguyen became the first Asian American woman to get confirmed as a Federal appellate judge. Where's Jacqueline? She's here tonight. There she is. You didn't bring your robe though. *[Laughter]* That's pretty cool. *[Laughter]* And we're so proud to have her along with another appellate judge I appointed, Denny Chin. He's here. Where's Denny? There he is, back there. So we thank them for their service.

Whether your heritage stems from South Asia or East Asia, from my native Hawaii or the Pacific Islands, whether you're first generation——

Audience member. Woo-hoo!

The President. These Hawaiians here—*[laughter]*—what's up with that?

Audience members. Woo-hoo! *[Laughter]* Aloha!

The President. Whether you are first generation or the fifth, you're helping to build a better America.

And I know it can be tempting—given the success that's on display here tonight—for people to buy into the myth of the "model minority" and glance over the challenges that this community still faces. But we have to remember there's still educational disparities like higher dropout rates in certain groups, lower college enrollment rates in others. There's still economic disparities like higher rates of poverty and obstacles to employment. There are health disparities like higher rates of diabetes and cancer and Hepatitis B. Those who are new to America, many still face language barriers. Others, like Vincent Chin, who we lost three decades ago, have been victims of horrible hate crimes, driven by the kinds of ignorance and prejudice that are an affront to everything America stands for.

So those are real problems, and we can't ignore them. And if we're going to do a better job addressing them, then we first have to stop grouping everybody just in one big category.

Dozens of different communities fall under the umbrella of the Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and we have to respect that the experiences of immigrant groups are distinct and different. And your concerns run the gamut.

That's something that Washington needs to understand better. And that's why I reestablished the White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders—so that we could better identify specific issues within specific communities. Many of those Commissioners are here. I want to thank them for the great job that they're doing.

And so we're making a difference on that front and on many other fronts. When we stepped up support for America's small businesses, we stepped up support for this community, providing over \$7 billion in loans for small businesses owned by Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. When we passed health care reform, we put in place new mechanisms to get better data about health disparities. Because of that law, nearly 3 million Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are going to receive expanded and preventive coverage through private insurance, and nearly 1 million are receiving free preventive services through Medicare.

So some of the things that matter to this community are things that matter to every community, like making sure that a woman earns an equal day's pay for an equal day's work, or ending "don't ask, don't tell" so that nobody has to hide who they love to serve the country they love, or enacting education reform so that every child has access to good schools and higher education, or caring for our veterans because it's our duty to serve them as well as they have served us.

That's what this country is about. That's what we've always been about. We've gone through some tough years because of this extraordinary recession and we've still got a long way to go. But we will get there. We will arrive at that destination where every child born in America regardless of race, creed, color, is going to have a chance. We're going to do that together, because in this country, we look out for each other. We fight for each other. If somebody is suffering through injustice or inequality, we take up their cause as if it was our own. That's the story of America. And that's certainly the story of this community.

In the midst of World War II, when the son of Japanese immigrants, Gordon Hirabayashi, ignored the curfews and refused transfer to an internment camp, when he was jailed for his defiance, when he later appealed his conviction and took his case all the way to the Supreme Court, he understood that he was fighting for something larger than himself. And he once said, "I never look at my case just as a Japanese American case. It's an American case, with principles that affect the fundamental human rights of all Americans." And while Gordon is no longer with us, later this year I'll award him the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian award America has to offer. Because he reminds us that each of us is only who we are today because somebody, somewhere, felt a sense of responsibility—not just to themselves, but to their family, and their communities and to this country that we all love.

So tonight we honor the trailblazers who came before. But we also celebrate the leaders yet to come, all the young people who are here tonight. Together, it's our turn to be responsible for the future. It's our turn to make sure the next generation has more opportunities than we did. It's our turn to make sure that no matter who you are, no matter where you came from, no matter what you look like, America forever remains the place where you can make it if you try.

Thank you, everybody. God bless you. God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:46 p.m. at the Ritz-Carlton hotel. In his remarks, he referred to former Secretary of Transportation Norman Y. Mineta. He also referred to his sister Maya Soetoro-Ng, her husband Konrad Ng, and their daughters Suhaila and Savita.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Asian Pacific American Institute for Congressional Studies annual gala.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Chin, Denny; Chu, Judy M.; Honda, Michael M.; Inouye, Daniel K.; Mineta, Norman Y.; Ng, Konrad; Ng, Savita; Ng, Suhaila; Nguyen, Jacqueline H.; Soetoro-Ng, Maya.

Subjects: Armed Forces, U.S. : "Don't ask, don't tell" policy, repeal; Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Asian American and Pacific Islander servicemembers; Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, efforts to increase participation in Federal programs; Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, President's Advisory Commission on; Asian Pacific American Institute for Congressional Studies; Business and industry : Small businesses :: Promotion efforts; Civil rights : Minorities :: Minority rights and ethnic tolerance; Civil rights : Wage equality; Decorations, medals, and awards : Presidential Medal of Freedom; Education : Minority students; Health and medical care : Home health care; Health and medical care : Medicare and Medicaid; White House Office : Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, White House Initiative on.

DCPD Number: DCPD201200349.